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Virtual Visitation takes hold in Texas

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BY SHELLY SLATER/WFAA-TV

The way people deal with divorce is changing.

Many parents are virtually there these days thanks to computers and a new law in Texas.

The divorce drill for most separated fathers is seeing their children on the first, third, and fifth Fridays



But for John Speer, living 1,200 miles away from his three kids makes it tough.

"It was so depressing," Speer said. "It was a painful thought to think of my kids. It was like a knife in my heart."

So Speer got to work helping with a new bill in Texas called Virtual Visitation.

Texas is now one of four states taking divorce into the digital age by allowing parents to connect with kids through computers at court appointed times.

Eleven-year-old Trevor saves athletic talk just for Dad.

"Hey, how are your six pack abs going?" Speer asks. "You still doing your sit ups and push ups?"

A show of Trevor's muscles says it all. It's a picture worth more than a thousand words.

Another time, Speer could actually see the difference the day his 13-year-old Betsy got

contacts.

"My first video call was just as good as the last 18 months of phone calls. It was that much better," said Speer.

Child Psychologist Pete Stavinoha says kids who grow up with both parents have less behavioral problems.

Studies show kids growing up without dads are 24 times more likely to run away and 15 times more likely to end up in prison as a teenager.

"That's an important aspect for any child growing up is to have a gender identity, role modeling of behaviors, and how you carry yourself," said Stavinoha.

He cautions Virtual Visits should not replace custodial visits, but adding them allows parents and children connect.

"We've just got closer together and stuff," Betsy said. "Now, I know what his life is like and he knows what my life is like."

Critics worry the computer craze will drive families farther apart.

"I don't want it to be too easy for parents to split apart by 1,500 miles," said Stavinoha.

Divorce lawyer Tom Raggio says relocation laws are the toughest and most unpredictable part of family court, but Virtual Visits could change rulings.

"It will add some difficulty, but it will solve other difficulties," said Raggio.

Raggio is sure of one thing. For Virtual Visitation to work, it needs to be outlined in the divorce decree. Things like who is responsible for the equipment, what time the appointments are and where they will happen should be agreed upon.

Betsy says Virtual Visits will make her feel more comfortable next time she sees her dad.

"Because last time I saw him, it was awkward because I hadn't seen him in a long time," she explained. "But now, it will be like, 'Hey, Dad!' Ya know? Like I just saw him yesterday."

And although being there virtually is better than not being there at all, Speer says one thing is still hard to take.

"The fact that I can't jump through the screen and hug them with all my heart," he said.

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